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Reflexive conversations: constructing hermeneutic designs for qualitative management research.

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Abstract

Responding to calls to widen the range of qualitative approaches used within management research, this article addresses perceived difficulties in applying hermeneutics to interview based research and suggests ways forward for management researchers to develop their own hermeneutic derived research designs. Firstly, it reviews how tools from the hermeneutic tradition have been utilised, demonstrating specifically how a sub-branch, critical hermeneutics, is particularly well suited to the complexities of management research offering a flexible means of exploring complex research relationships between ‘texts’, contexts and the researcher. Secondly, the paper makes a specific contribution through detailing the experience of the inception and implementation of a hermeneutic research design and demonstrates of application of a four-stage hermeneutic analytic model for use with interview transcripts. This case addresses how the interviews have been co-created by the research participant and the researcher and suggests ways of acknowledging the implications of this relationship and thus of increasing

researcher reflexivity within the analytical process. The benefits and limitations of implementing hermeneutic research designs are then discussed.

(169 words)

Introduction

This article responds to a highlighted need within management and organization studies to explore different approaches to qualitative research design in order to develop ‘more and better tools in the qualitative domain’ (Aguinis, Pierce, Bosco, and Muslin 2009:109), as well as responding to calls by, e.g., Cunliffe (2003) and Cassell, Bishop, Symon, Johnson and Buehring (2009), to attend more to researcher reflexivity in qualitative methodologies. This growing interest in expanding the scope and diversity of management research (Cunliffe 2011) is reflected in recent contributions to this journal which develop diverse innovative research designs and analytical frameworks, drawing on research traditions from areas outside management (Clarke, Kwon and Wodak 2012; Burns, Hyde, Killeth, Poland and Gray 2014; Radaelli, Guerci, Cirella and Shani 2014). In light of this growing interest, and given the wider importance of the hermeneutic tradition within the social sciences, the relative paucity of management studies using hermeneutic-based approaches, particularly with respect to interview-based research, constitutes a significant oversight. This phenomenon may be explained, at least

in part, by the perception that the hermeneutic tradition is complex, dispersed (Butler 1998:285) and not easily applicable beyond text-based research.

It would therefore seem pertinent to take stock of the ways in which hermeneutic approaches have been used in management and organization studies to date, before going on to explore further possible applications and their potential benefits. This paper therefore aims to demonstrate how hermeneutic approaches can be made more accessible to researchers and used to enhance researcher reflexivity, through the discussion of three questions: firstly, how can hermeneutics be utilised to inform the development of research projects within management and organization studies? Secondly, how can appropriate hermeneutic methods for analysing interview-based research be developed? Finally, how can such approaches enhance researcher reflexivity within the research process? In addressing these questions this article makes a specific contribution to management research methodology through presenting an illustrative case of the crafting and realisation of a hermeneutic research project (as explained in the next section). In so doing, we demonstrate the processes by which hermeneutic principles can be developed, a) into a coherent research strategy and design, b) into an analytical framework, and c) as a means of ensuring researcher reflexivity in approaching interview-based research.

Background and context

The inspiration for this paper comes from the experience of one of the authors, who, in researching a complex research context, became increasingly convinced that a hermeneutic approach would help her to understand both the context itself and her different roles within it, i.e., as researcher, teacher, former practitioner and student. Although an interview-based method

seemed most appropriate to address her research questionsⁱ, she initially struggled to find examples of hermeneutic designs for collecting and analysing interview-based research. So, by way of a solution, and with reference to more traditional text-based designs, e.g. Phillips and Brown (1993), she started to devise her own tailor-made approach. As the project progressed she began to realise how her different roles were impacting on her research participants' pre-understanding of her and on her pre-understanding of them, and how this in turn was affecting the way in which the interviews were being co-created. She therefore found it necessary to consider how a hermeneutic approach could be used as a way of capturing researcher reflexivity. The story of this research project forms the basis of the presentation and discussion in the second half of this paper.

Reflexivity is a contested concept with a wide variety of interpretations (see for example Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000; Cunliffe 2003): however, for the purposes of this paper, we take reflexivity to mean *the development of an understanding of the effect the researcher has on the research process and the possible outcomes of the research*. From this perspective, the researcher is understood to be a player in the social world, with her own background, assumptions and ways of behaving that will affect the way the research is conducted, especially in terms of the intricacies of social exchange within the research context (Cunliffe, 2003:984). This understanding of the role of the researcher also means that the research process can be seen as an exercise in the hermeneutic experience of interpretation, and one that might benefit from a more formalised hermeneutic analytical framework, as demonstrated in the illustrative research case to follow.

However, before turning to the research case and discussion of further developments of hermeneutic research designs within management and organization studies, we first provide a brief overview of the development of the hermeneutic tradition.

The hermeneutic tradition: approaches and tools

Hermeneutics has been described as ‘a theory of interpretation’ (Bleicher, 1980:1), in keeping with its etymology, from the classical Greek verb *hermeneuein*, ‘to interpret’ (Thatchenkery, 2001:112). However, although the word’s goes back to ancient Greek, hermeneutics emerged in the Middle Ages as a means of interpreting the Bible (i.e., scriptural exegesis) and has, more recently, been developed as a social science methodology that primarily focuses on textual interpretation, although what counts as a ‘text’ can be quite broadly understood: see Gadamer (1975) for a history of hermeneutics; and Barrett, Powley and Pearce (2011), Prasad (2002), and Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000), for concise overviews.

In general, contemporary hermeneutic studies within the social sciences aim at promoting *understanding* through a process of interpretation, engaging the text in a ‘network of meanings’ that is analogous to the network of meanings by which the researcher understands herself in relation to the world (Dilthey, 1883/1985). This process of interpretation requires researchers to take part in an ongoing dialogical interaction between context, elements of the text, and their own presuppositions, pre-understandings, or prejudices (Gadamer, 1975), in order to arrive at a more informed understanding of the text. To facilitate this process, specific concepts have been developed by key hermeneutic writers such as Schleiermacher (1838/1998) and Dilthey (1883/1985) in the nineteenth century, and Heidegger (1927/1996), Ricoeur (1971/1981),

Gadamer (1975) and Habermas (1992) in the twentieth, each having different philosophical influences and areas of emphasis and reflecting and developing different branches of the hermeneutic tradition.

Certain important concepts developed by these writers have been taken up as tools or ‘principles’ that help to develop understanding within the research process (Klein and Myers, 1999). The best-known of these concepts is the ‘*hermeneutic circle*’ or ‘*cycle*’, first described by Schleiermacher (Palmer, 1969). Here the metaphor of the circle captures the iterative nature of interpretation, in that it operates by moving from text to context in ‘a circular dialectical fashion’ (Thatchenkery, 2001:118), with role of the interpreter being to learn about, and incorporate into the interpretation, the mores, fashions, or politics of the context which shaped the text’s production. The premise of the hermeneutic approach is therefore that the text is part of a greater whole which the researcher needs to explore and work within.

Other important concepts from the hermeneutic tradition relate to what the researchers themselves bring to the interpretation. The first of these concepts is ‘*pre-understanding and understanding*’ (Gadamer, 1975: 268); the idea that we do not enter into the hermeneutic process as a *tabula rasa*, with no experience to bring to bear on the process that can or will be modified and changed by it. In other words, interpretation can be seen as ‘a dialectic between distance and familiarity’ (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000:62), the hermeneutic concept encapsulating the outcome of this dialectic being the ‘*fusion of horizons*’ (Gadamer, 1975: 268). This process means that, as the interpreter goes through the processes of understanding the world of the text (the ‘distant’), the world of the text becomes more accessible and part of her experience as she

iterates between the world-view she is interpreting and her own world. The interpreter ultimately arrives at a point where the horizons of these worlds fuse, thus allowing a better understanding of the other.

The next group of concepts relates to how the researcher engages in a dialogical relationship with the text through a ‘hermeneutic conversation between the interpreter and the text’ in which ‘the interpreter puts questions to the text and the text in turn puts questions to the interpreter’ (Prasad, 2002:19). One well-known hermeneutic approach facilitating this process is Ricoeur’s three ‘moments’, understood as interrelated, interdependent, mutually modifying phases of a process that act together to produce some final result (Ricoeur, 1971/1981; Phillips and Brown, 1993). Ricoeur’s interpretive framework can be represented as, firstly, the *socio-historical analysis*, focusing on ‘intentional, referential and contextual aspects of a text’ (Thompson, 1971/1981:138), that is to say exploring the world-view of the text reflected through the content; and secondly, the *formal analysis*, which concentrates on the internal structures of the text (i.e. *what* is said and *how* it is said). So far this is a double method, looking at the inner workings of the text and the content. However, the third process, that of *interpretation and re-interpretation*, brings these two together (Ricoeur, 1971/1981, 1978, 1981), focusing on how a text’s ‘world’ and ‘internal structure’ work together to create meanings. With such traditional text-based research the conversations may have to end where an interpretation is arrived at. However, if the researcher is interacting with the living authors of ‘texts’, with interviewees for example, a continuation of the process of interpretation, a ‘double hermeneutic’ (Giddens, 1987), may take place, with the researcher returning to the interviewee to share her interpretation, which may then

again be reinterpreted through a further dialogical process to reach a further level of understanding.

In addition to ways of understanding the context within which the text was created, another concept, the principle of ‘suspicion’ (Klein and Myers, 1999), derived from Ricoeur’s *hermeneutics of suspicion* (Ricoeur, 1976), and with an emphasis on power dimensions, helps the researcher to reflect on how the context might shape or mask meaning within the text. Here, the challenge for researchers is to place themselves within the context of the text’s production in order to understand intended and unintended messages. This development of the tradition is known as *critical hermeneutics* (see Thompson, 1981), and is particularly associated with the work of Ricoeur and to some extent Habermas (e.g., Habermas, 1992).

The hermeneutic concepts and processes outlined above have had some influence on qualitative research design within management and organization studies as well as in other disciplines. Some examples of these are discussed in the following section.

Hermeneutic methodologies in management and organization studies

Researchers in a variety of disciplines have drawn on the concepts discussed above to create hermeneutic-informed methodologies. These disciplines include *information systems research* (Myers, 1994; Butler, 1998; Klein and Myers, 1999), *nursing studies* (Charalambous, Papadopoulos and Beadsmoore, 2008), and *education* (Gallagher, 1992). Meanwhile, in management and organizational studies, examples of critical hermeneutic-inspired research began to appear in the 1990s, the earliest and most influential of these being Phillips and Brown

(1993), and over the last decade more hermeneutic-inspired work has emerged, including Prasad and Mir (2002), Lueger, Sandner, Meyer and Hammerschmid (2005), Waistell (2006), Durepos, Helms Mills and Mills (2008), Robinson and Kerr (2009), and Elliot and Robinson (2012). Such research using overtly hermeneutic research designs is, however, still not common, although it could be argued that some familiar approaches, particularly for the analysis of secondary text-based data, e.g. qualitative content analysis, can become hermeneutic if they take into consideration the socio-historical context in which the text was produced. In addition, given their iterative approach, some forms of film analysis (e.g., Denzin, 2004) or discourse analysis (Bell, 2011), may be seen as hermeneutic in approach; while for Barrett *et al.* (2011), hermeneutics has influenced the development of areas of organization studies itself, including *culture*, *sense-making*, *identity* and *situated learning*. The hermeneutic influence on such approaches is, however, rarely fully acknowledged or demonstrated as such (Gummesson, 2000). Nevertheless, one approach which has periodically been attractive to management researchers is that of critical hermeneutics.

The critical hermeneutic tradition within management and organization studies

The value of hermeneutic approaches in management and organization studies is well demonstrated by a number of text-based hermeneutic studies. Phillips and Brown (1993), in their study of the intersection of power, culture and communication in Syncrude Canada's corporate advertising, employ Ricoeur's 'three moments' as an analytical framework to demonstrate how the company attempted to structure target groups' understandings of the organization, showing how the organization 'tried to weave together a number of highly legitimate societal myths in order to produce a new myth: a highly legitimate corporate image' (Phillips and Brown,

1993:1571). According to the authors, a hermeneutic approach was helpful in providing a structured method for a) examining the role of symbolic phenomena in organizations, b) examining the sources of the texts, and c) including ‘formal’ methods for analysing organizational texts (Phillips and Brown, 1993:1548).

Prasad and Mir (2002) is, in some ways, a similar study to that of Phillips and Brown, although in this case the authors take a four-stage approach to the interpretation of letters from Oil Company CEOs to shareholders. As a first stage, Prasad and Mir select texts that ‘communicate implicit beliefs about the organization and its relationship with the surrounding world’ (Fiol, 1989:278, quoted in Prasad and Mir, 2002:97), namely letters to shareholders published in oil company annual reports. Secondly, the authors consider ‘the social, cultural, historical and industrial context in which the text was produced’ (Prasad and Mir, 2002:97). The third phase then follows, involving ‘an analytic moment where textual interpretation is produced through the mutually constituting relationship between what the researcher considers to be the abstracted meaning of the text and what he or she has foregrounded as the anchored context in which the text was produced’ (Prasad and Mir, 2002:97). In the fourth stage, the authors go on to use another hermeneutic circle, passing the texts through the theory of *orientalism* (Said, 1978), which emphasises the creation of ‘the (oriental) other’.

Drawing on Prasad and Mir’s framework, Durepos *et al.* (2008), also use archival material to explore the interplay between corporate and political power in the creation by Pan American Airways (PAA) of a ‘myth of “German threat”’ in order to ‘privilege PAA’s close relationship with the US State Department’ (Durepos *et al.*, 2008:116). To do this, the authors draw on

Habermas' (1992) critical hermeneutics, their presumption being that 'texts are not transparent or neutral entities but are instead cultural products that embody the author's spatial and temporal situatedness' (Durepos *et al.*, 2008:119).

In all of these studies, the wider context in which the research takes place is of prime importance. The authors bring out the struggles and multiple histories that are both embedded in the texts and which contextualise their production. The principle of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1991; Klein and Myers, 1999) is shown to be a helpful tool in questioning the assumptions of the reader and the intentions of the author; while Prasad and Mir also make use of Said's *orientalism* (Said 1978), as a further conceptual lens for the researcher in terms of understanding the context.

In moving away from purely textual analysis, Myers in his case study approach (Myers 1994), brings together different data sources to the study of an information system implementation in a government department. In subjecting the failed project to a hermeneutic analysis based on the approaches of Gadamer and Ricoeur, the author is able to understand the project's failure in its larger social context. In so doing, Myers argues that the hermeneutic process works to make sense of 'the apparent absurdities, contractions and oppositions' within the organization (Myers 1994:191).

However, despite Phillips and Brown's (1993) claim that a hermeneutic approach 'enables self-conscious reflection on the social conditions' surrounding the research, none of the above-mentioned studies focuses explicitly on the researchers' own experiences. In contrast, Elliot and Robinson's (2012) study of business school websites introduces a cycle of analysis where the

authors consider the results of other analytical cycles through their role as employees within the sector, with their own pre-understandings, experiences and assumptions of the schools under analysis. Similarly, in Robinson and Kerr (2009), a study based on participant observation of leadership behaviour, the authors reflect on their own lived experiences not only as researchers but also as employees, aiming to provide ‘a nuanced interpretation of events through lived experience and hermeneutic analysis’(Robinson and Kerr, 2009:876). In order to get a theoretical perspective on the ‘dark side’ of leadership behaviour, the authors (similarly to Prasad and Mir, 2002), pass their interpretation through a critical hermeneutic cycle that employs Bourdieu’s concept of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 1998).

This brief overview demonstrates that, in the hermeneutic tradition, interpretation becomes ‘*a process of multiple contextualisation*’ (Klein and Myers, 1999), a series of possible conversations, the nature of which depends on the orientation of the researcher and the nature of the research. For management and organizational researchers, exploration of existing studies is instructive in terms of what has been achieved in developing critical hermeneutic research designs within the field: it is, however, also interesting to note what is missing. Given that the clear majority of studies drawn on here are ‘text based’ , we suggest that there is a need for work which also addresses issues of research design in dealing with primary, and especially, interview-generated research. This brief overview therefore indicates that more guidance may be welcome for researchers in terms of, a) ‘doing’ hermeneutic methodology, e.g. how it has informed research decisions, and b), how it might be used beyond the traditional notion of the ‘hermeneutic text’, with, e.g., interview-based research. We turn to exploration of these points in the section which follows.

Doing hermeneutic management research: an illustrative case

How then could the hermeneutic tradition be used to develop research approaches which include analytical methods for interview-based research? What follows is an account of how this was done in one specific research context. This process involved engagement with four major elements, namely: 1) the context and its whole; 2) the hermeneutic research process, the researcher's pre-understanding and relationship with the research context and process; 3) the creation of the analytical framework; and 4) reflexivity in terms of the researcher's own role in the hermeneutic research processes.

Research interviews as hermeneutic encounters

In this section, we draw on a critical hermeneutic study of students' experiences of management education (the full-time MBA) at four leading UK business schools (Author 2005). The complexity of the researcher's role was a key issue in this project. She was a teacher and educational practitioner who had been working for some years overseas before returning to a UK business school to study for a PhD. The original intention was to conduct research in her previous employer's organization or a similar organisation, however her 'in between' position within the university context (as illustrated by the research diary extract below) raised many intriguing questions that resonated with her original motivations for doing a PhD.

Research diary extract

Having been an expatriate for ten years and returning to education, my first few months back in the UK and specifically within a university setting were disorientating and confusing (and in

some ways have continued to be so!). During that time I spent time with other doctoral students but also with departmental MA students.

I found myself mixing more with overseas students, particularly those from countries I had worked in (especially China). Over time, these students talked to me, as a sort of inside/outsider (or vice versa), about some of the difficulties they were having in adapting to and understanding the demands of the programme and what was expected of them. They had concerns for example that, although the courses were billed as ‘international’, British students were advantaged in that they already knew the system and that consequently overseas students were disadvantaged. I began to feel increasingly in a sort of ‘piggy in the middle’ position because, as my experience and background became known among the teaching staff, some staff members started to talk to me about the ‘difficulties’ *they* were having with the same group of students.

During a particularly down moment over the difficulties of gaining access to conduct my research, I attended an MA module on ‘international management learning’. A coffee-time discussion ensued as to what extent the university could be considered an international organization that provided equal rights for different students. I realised that the concerns which had brought me back to education were being mirrored by the concerns articulated in this MA group. I saw the irony of worrying about finding an entrée into a purportedly ‘international’ organization when I was already in one.

In the ensuing project, 45 interviews of between 1-2 hours in length were conducted and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. The interviews, conducted in 2003, took place in the heyday of the full-time MBA, each of the schools in the project having large cohorts of up to 100 students with some 50 different nationalities represented.

With the interview transcripts, the 'text' in question was a representation of an oral dialogue which took place between a research participant and the researcher: and this process of co-creation gave rise to specific methodological considerations that called for reflexivity on the part of the researcher concerning her role in influencing the process of text creation. In addition, in approaching a hermeneutic analysis of the interview transcripts, the importance emerged of taking into consideration that each participant had her/his own history, both personal and cultural. It was then for the researcher to approach each text as unique and, by going through the circle of 'pre-understanding' and 'understanding' and questioning her assumptions as to what the worldview of a particular person may be, using the text to build up a picture of the historical and socio-economic worldview that the participant presents.

This researcher's 'pre-understanding' of the MBA context was that students are extremely busy, highly motivated and somewhat ruthless, as portrayed, for example, in an autobiographical account of experiences on an MBA programme at Stanford Business School, *Snapshots from Hell* (Robinson, 1994), and with little time to spare. Students were therefore asked why they volunteered to be interviewed: their replies were varied, interesting and, in some cases a little sad, and certainly challenged pre-understandings. For example, one Chinese student said he had had very little contact with British people since coming to the university and that was why he

had agreed to do the interview: *'I don't have too many opportunities to communicate to exchange views with British people and actually that's also the reason why I'd like to accept your interview'* (U1R4). On the other hand, some students confirmed the pre-understanding of 'the instrumental MBA student': *'it's a good chance to reflect on the experience, especially as we have interviews coming up and are going to be asked what we got out of our MBA'* (U4R4) or *'it's a method of clarifying my thoughts'* (U3R8).

In addition, as an interview can be seen as a hermeneutic event (Alvesson and Sköldbeg 2000), some of the responses illustrated the interviewees' pre-understandings of the researcher and her role within the school (and what they thought the research experience would engender): *'I want people to understand how we feel'* (U1R9) and *'I hope this makes a difference'* (U2R2). So, although her position as 'an independent researcher' had been stated at the outset, students sometimes perceived the researcher as an 'earpiece' or (supposed) direct line to the MBA office, as reflected in one interview where the researcher was told: *'we are talking to you'* while in contrast *'we Chinese would never take our concerns directly to the MBA office'* (U1R7).

The analysis as a hermeneutic event: The analytical framework

The application of a specific hermeneutic analytical framework constructed for gaining understanding of the texts from this project is described below. The illustration consists of the three phases or 'moments' suggested by Ricoeur: the 'socio-historical' analysis which concerns the intentional, referential and contextual aspects of a text (Thompson 1981); the 'formal' which concerns discursive analysis of conventional and structural elements of the text; and interpretation and re-interpretation that bring the two other phases of analysis together (Ricoeur

1971/1981) and explore how a text's world and internal structure create meanings. In this third phase, we follow Prasad and Mir (2002) in using a particular theory as a means of dialoguing with emergent themes. The theories of Bourdieu and in particular his *forms of capital* (1986) and concepts of *field* and *habitus* (Bourdieu 1991) were used in exploring the positioning in and negotiation of social space in which the students engage: in effect, the critical cycle of the analysis. Finally, as this text is a result of work that the researcher was involved in co-creating, we have added a fourth level of interpretation, which concentrates on the role of the researcher in shaping the way the text is constructed and interpreted (see Table 1 below).

[INSERT TABLE ABOUT HERE]

The analytical framework is therefore structured as follows. The *first phase* looks at what the narrative is about (what world it describes – what we have termed a ‘worldview’, which, following Bourdieu (1991), could be taken to be an articulated manifestation of a ‘habitus’) and what the main referents are. The *second phase* goes back to those referents and examines how they are described and talked about, for example what adjectives and metaphors are used to describe/present the referents and how they are represented grammatically: are they for example spoken about in the active or passive voice? The *third phase* of interpretation circles back through both the previous two phases and finds resonance and synergy between them in the form of themes, patterns, and the contexts in which such narratives could be placed (in this case through reference to theoretical work). Then there is a *fourth phase* following the concept of pre-understanding and understanding (Gadamer, 1975:467), where the hermeneutic gaze (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000) is turned towards the role of the researcher/co-author of the text. In this

phase the researcher identifies anything she can see, either from the text or from her knowledge of the conditions in which the text was produced, which was caused (to some extent) by her specific personal involvement in the process.

What follows is a student describing his reasons for signing up to do a full-time MBA at a UK business school. This extract was chosen in that it is a relatively short, self-contained, story. This was important for the purpose of this current paper as even the 15 lines examined here have generated several pages of commentary. The different phases of analysis are described below.

Neil's story: The 'employability factor'

'So I mean it came to the point as well to be honest with you I was slightly disillusioned with my employer as well so again looking either to move out and again in my particular profession in many ways it is perceived that I was working for the vanguard of ELT [English Language Teaching] so again where do you go? - reassess a little bit and then you try, and particularly and if it's not Human (Resources) err if it's not dealing with people it's more dealing with change, and again I saw many examples of this thinking how can we do this? I'm in an international environment I've got quite a lot of experience working with different cultures and again try to build on those that knowledge base that you have and expand in a way that is vocationally err true and the fact is as well that the MBA for myself at 34 I'm thinking at the end of it if I did a Masters in HRM how easy would it be to convince employers with a MA in HRM or an MA in another discipline? Whereas the MBA there's the employability factor ...so you know, ...people always comment on an MBAs it's taken for granted that you'll get a job, I don't necessarily share that but its handy.'

Phase One

This is the first reading of the text and is about the *content* of the text and concentrates on its ‘worldview’, or as Phillips and Brown explain it, it is ‘an interested attempt to create a particular understanding of some portion of the world (Phillips and Brown, 1993:1559). The main question focused on is: *what world or worlds is/are being described here?* The following extract from the researcher’s research diary illustrates how she approached this stage of the hermeneutic cycle.

Research diary (extract)

What I see as being presented here is a world of *career* positioned in relation to the world of *management* (although interestingly the research participant’s previous job had been a senior teacher in a language school, which may have involved some, but very little, managerial responsibility). It is a world of *flexibility* and *movement* where loyalty to an employer is not taken as a given.

This is also a story about *career stages*. The ‘career’ narrator is in the process of changing direction but is still on the management path; in fact it seems he is trying to position himself more firmly on that path. In his story he presents himself as someone who is reflective, who has values, who is open to change. The narrator (Neil) takes as givens the inevitability of change and the need for the transferability of skills. He recognises a need to build up a skills portfolio and knowledge base and to have these validated by a well-known qualification. He knows how to stand back and assess what he has already done and work out how to repackage it. He has a perception of what in his experience is particularly ‘sellable’: namely his experience of dealing with ‘change’ and his international experience. He is also aware how *qualifications* add authority to previous experience and has a conception of how the MBA is perceived by others - as having high ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu 1986) – although this is a view which he attempts to disassociate himself from – ‘it’s taken for granted that you’ll get a job I don’t necessarily share that but

it's handy.'

Phase Two

In this second reading of the text the emphasis is much more on the *form* than the content; that is to say it is about how the text is constructed and what meanings can be represented in this process, thus adding an authority and richness to the original interpretation. In this reading we consider who the *social actors* are and how are they positioned within the text (this and the textual analysis below draw extensively on Halliday, 1994, and Fairclough, 2003). We also look at what *language* or *metaphors* are being used and *how time is represented* in the text.

The social actors involved in the text are:

- the past employer
- (future) employers
- the commentators ('people say')
- the narrative 'I'
- the (universal) generic 'you'
- the researcher
- people from his past professional experience
- generic 'people' ('always say...always comment')
- the participant ('myself at 34')

The generic you – *people say, people always comment on, it's taken for granted*. Here 'you' means something like 'people like us', i.e. people following this generic career path. There is an interplay between what 'they think' (*they=others*) and what 'I' think. By doing this he is asserting his own

identity – and so doing for reasons other than injecting a bit of (false?) modesty. However what others ‘think’ or ‘perceive’ is important for him, especially in relation to the MBA qualification (a suggestion of uncertainty here?).

Much of the vocabulary used is connected with *work and careers*: *employer, profession, employers, experience, vocationally, employability factor, job, knowledge base*. Many of the verbs and phrases used are connected to: a) *movement/traveling*: *to move out, where do you go?, at the end of it*; b) *reflection*: *reassess, thinking how can we do this?, I’m thinking*; c) *persuasion*: *to convince*; d) *development*: *to build on, to expand on*.

The role of metaphor is apparent in this text – that of a life and/or career as a ‘journey’ which goes through various stages. There is the life-history part of the story (the past, retrospective, until now) and the life-project part (the future, prospective, from now). He is suggesting that his career is an instance of a sort of abstract ‘model of a career’, a template to be followed; but it is conceived in terms of patterns of time, of temporal progress (not in terms of geography).

The use of the metaphor, ‘*vanguard*’, meaning the foremost part of an advancing army or fleet, or the leaders of a movement, is interesting, suggesting that the speaker has got as far as he can in this current career/field and therefore sees a need to reposition himself. The MBA also takes on a symbolic role here with its perceived connection to the ‘*employability factor*’.

Phase Three

This phase involves an initial element of *stocktaking* - *what have we got here so far?* Reading One shows the world of work and careers that involves change and movement, developing skills and convincing employers. Reading Two shows the relative importance of actors, skills and qualifications in the story. It also reveals the time frames involved and the types of activities that are privileged. In addition, several metaphors are used (or implied), particularly that of the *life* or *career journey*.

Themes then can be established: first, by bringing together form and content and relating them to the historical/socio-economic context in which they are situated. The key themes emergent from this passage are: (1) *selling yourself, presenting yourself* with prospective employers in mind by showing to others what you have learnt from past employment and where you want to go. This is set within a context of flexible employment and lifelong learning, and is followed by (2) *the role of the qualification* – how it is seen by others, how it will help you on your journey.

Second, themes can be established through dialoguing or having a conversation with existing theory: in other words - what literatures do the themes speak to and what can the theories reveal about the emergent themes? We might, for example, take these themes further by circling to theories such as Bourdieu's *forms of capital* theory (1986) and then back again to the text, thus revealing more about the role of the MBA in the social context. In this respect the narrator might be said to be considering: 'What capitals do I have to trade on in the market?'; 'What other forms of capital are employers looking for?'; 'What do they see MBA as representing?'; 'How do they perceive other qualifications?' It could be argued that the narrator's *cultural capital*, in terms of his transferable skills, is quite strong and that he has some *social capital* gained by working 'at

the Vanguard of the ELT profession'. He has, however, chosen to take the MBA instead of another MA (in HRM for example), as he is aware of his need to build up his *symbolic capital*, which can then be converted into *economic capital* by means of a managerial job.

By doing this type of assessment, the speaker is responding to the demands of the *field* (Bourdieu, 1991), knowing that he needs certain forms of capital in order to re-position himself in the management field, in which he is at present only peripheral. So once again, it could be argued that he is re-evaluating his present *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1991) and working out how (if it is possible) this needs to be adapted in order to be successful in this field. Circling back to the text, this analysis is borne out by the use of the language of *evaluation*, *development* and *movement* and by the symbolic significance attached to the MBA, as reflected in the comment about employability.

What then does this three-stage analysis tell us about the narrator's relationship to the world he describes? It tells us how he is situated historically and in social/economic terms and how he intends to reposition himself, showing how he uses the MBA in these terms. There is planning and strategic thinking, but also some uncertainty and doubt. The 'international' is important – one of what we might term his (three) 'trump cards', which are, as he presents them in the text, 'having international experience', 'experience of dealing with people' and 'dealing with change'.

Phase Four: What is the role of the researcher in this story?

Phase four is a further cycle of *reflection* in which the researcher returns to the interview and reflects on the process.

Research diary (extract)

‘I’ [the researcher/one of the current authors] am actually involved in this story quite directly. Firstly, I am directly addressed - ‘*to be honest with you*’ - in a confessional/confidential manner. Secondly, I have a direct connection to the speaker’s past world. Reference is being made to shared referents – there is meaning beyond the text that a third party would not necessarily have access to. The participant (‘Neil’) is aware that we have both worked for the same organization (although we did not know each other before the interview). He is making reference to a commonly held belief among employees in the sector he comes from that the organization’s reputation as ‘*a vanguard*’ is not as merited as it should be. This is conveyed by the use of the word ‘*perceived*’ and use of the passive voice: that is to say, he is disengaging from the idea (i.e. ‘some people think this but I don’t’). His comments are however guarded, as seen by the use of the word ‘*slightly*’ (disillusioned) as a modifier. So he also has a ‘pre-understanding’ of who I am and what I represent. Neil knows my former position within the organization had been senior to his and that (at the time of interview) my husband was also employed in a senior position in the same organization. However post-interview discussion revealed that our views were in fact quite similar, so I suppose at that point he modified his pre-understanding (of me) to a (limited) understanding. So the story is framed in ‘confessional’ terms (‘I’ll be honest with you’) and strengthened by reference to shared understandings but modified by his (pre) understanding of who I am and what I may represent (reflected in tentative/exploratory qualities of the interaction). So what has this story given me that transcends my pre-understanding? My initial conception of Neil was as very confident and focused – but this extract foreshadows uncertainties and doubts which evolved in the process of this interview and which are reflected in the language through, for example, the use of modifiers.

The analysis of this interview shows the circling between the whole and the part, circling between the different stages of the analysis, circling between the text and the theory and the researcher’s

pre-understanding and understanding. This circling is a constant feature of a hermeneutic approach and for the most part goes on in the researcher's head - to the extent that it becomes an almost unconscious process. What has been demonstrated here is how it can be formalized systematically so that it is transparent in a way that can be understood and followed by a reader who can then draw their own conclusions as to the plausibility of the interpretation arrived at through the hermeneutic processes undertaken.

Hermeneutic research designs: benefits, limitations and ways forward for future development

In this section we reflect on our experiences of designing, conducting and presenting hermeneutic research in a specific research context and from this draw out some questions and issues which researchers may wish to consider when developing their own research designs.

We have argued that the hermeneutic research approach that a researcher constructs must be appropriate to the specific 'text' which she is working with. Researchers have a wealth of hermeneutic concepts and perspectives or principles (Klein and Myers, 1999) to select from in constructing a research design. The challenge for the researcher lies in finding the right combinations and balance for the project in hand in terms of the context of the research and the research questions posed, taking into account that 'the choice of research conceptions, questions and methods is always value laden' (Deetz, 1985:123) and 'the best researchers can do is to be critical and reflexive and to examine their own and others assumptions' (Phillips and Brown 1993:1573). In our illustrative case we have included this as an integral part of the hermeneutic

process and, as already noted, presented it in such way that readers, including research participants, can follow the process and come to their own conclusions as to its value.

We found particular advantages to researching management education in this way. This approach offers the researcher the opportunity to frame students' experiences and expectations in socio-political and socio-historical contexts, which is crucial in terms of taking a reflexive approach as to why and how management education is provided. Finally, such an approach allows the researcher to turn the interpretive lens on herself, to question her own motivations for engaging in the research and to reflect on how she impacted the research process. This reflexive approach also means that the research design can be altered or modified in response to the ongoing analysis.

We have given an example of how the tradition of hermeneutics can be utilised both as a methodology in terms of a general research strategy and how it can be applied as an analytical method – as a specific means for analysing interview-based research. There are arguably weaknesses to such an approach, especially for doing a time-bounded piece of research, in that the analysis is time consuming - indeed it would have been impossible to have analysed all the hundreds of stories contained in the 42 student interviews in the way demonstrated in this paper. In addition, as Ricoeur argues, the analysis is never complete in that it can be reinterpreted as times change. As a considerable period has elapsed since the interview (which was conducted before the 2008 financial crisis), has it now become a text which needs specific historical-hermeneutic situating (indeed, a student recently commented on this text that 'no one can change career at 34 anymore')?

Hermeneutic approaches have been criticised in various ways, for example that the hermeneutic circle can turn into a ‘vicious circle’ that you can never break out of (Bernstein 1983:133). In addition, the fact that the circle is constantly tightening through the iterative process can also give the impression of an ‘orientation towards a unitary meaning’ (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000:101), a feeling that ‘dissonance and ambiguity’ are to some extent sidelined in the attempt to find a tight interpretation. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the circle is not intended to reach an end point or indeed a unitary meaning - the meaning of the text is constantly changing as the world is constantly changing and so it ‘never ceases to speak to us’ (Ricoeur, 1991:27). The interpretation is always open to reinterpretation and is always fallible (Habermas, 1992:17). Thus, due to the constantly changing nature of the context, there is an absence of closure and a demand for constant reflexivity on the part of the researcher. We suggest that going through a formal process of noting thoughts in a research diary whilst following a framework, such as that demonstrated above, throughout the analytical process does help in recording and keeping track of the process as well as capturing dissonance and ambiguity. The approach we have outlined also addresses the critique of hermeneutics as too text-based and therefore evading lived-experience (e.g., Myers, 2008), in that it engages not only with the lived experience of the researcher (as evidenced by the diary entries) but also the lived experience of the interviewees in co-creating the texts, and potentially in reinterpreting them.

However the flexibility that the hermeneutic tradition offers researchers in developing analytical frameworks is not without danger: there is a possible temptation to over-complicate by taking on too many circles of interpretation. Notwithstanding, a hermeneutic research design can help to

capture and formalise what is the messy, cyclical and iterative nature of the process of interpretative research. However, given that a faithful presentation of the research process requires a significant amount of text, the very ‘messiness’ of the process poses questions of presentation for researchers (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2011), such as: how can – or should – the cycles be presented at the writing-up stage? To what extent should the researcher be faithful to the methodology at the risk of including material that, although essential to the process, may seem superfluous or trivial to an outside reader?

We have emphasised that each hermeneutic research encounter is co-created and therefore unique and so have shared our case as illustrative. That is, we do not wish to prescribe a set of criteria for others to follow, but rather to suggest that qualitative researchers think these issues through in relation to their own research contexts in order to come up with solutions that are appropriate for them. The hermeneutic researcher might therefore consider questions including: what the status of their interpretation is, and how they judge the value of their research design. We have also argued that, from a non-foundationalist perspective, no interpretation is definitive: as Ricoeur argues, the purpose of dialogical hermeneutics is not to find definitive or true interpretations, for interpretation is always ‘incomplete and tentative’ (Ricoeur, 1991:137), but rather it uses different levels of interpretation to build *plausibility*. Thus, ‘(i)t is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our immediate reach’ (Thompson, 1981:50). However, developing a framework such as that demonstrated in this paper serves to make both the process and the researcher’s reflexivity explicit in ways that provide the opportunity for future readers – and the participants themselves – to form their own judgements on the value of the research. Indeed, in the case of the participants there may be opportunities for

a further stage of reflexivity that may help to orientate their own future actions (Thompson, 1981). We suggest that one way of further developing the hermeneutic approach within management and organization studies, might be to consider how research designs could involve research participants more fully in processes of interpretation.

Conclusion

This article posed three questions: firstly, how can the tradition of hermeneutics be utilised to inform the development of research methodology and research design within management and organization studies? Secondly, how can hermeneutics be applied to inform the development of analytical methods, e.g., as a specific means or tool for analysing interview based research? And finally, how can hermeneutic approaches enhance researcher reflexivity in the research process?

In addressing these questions, we outlined the historical development of the hermeneutic tradition and discussed some of the key concepts underpinning contemporary hermeneutic approaches. Then, using an interview-based research project, we demonstrated the construction of a hermeneutic methodological strategy and analytical framework. Examples from research illustrated why the researcher turned to a hermeneutic methodology and how contemporary hermeneutic approaches, particularly critical hermeneutics, can help in making sense of participants' descriptions of their experiences and their relationship to their worlds.

This paper therefore makes a contribution to management and organization studies through demonstrating how hermeneutics can work at the level of philosophy, methodology, and also method in helping researchers design qualitative and reflexive interview-based projects

appropriate for the complex environments in which they operate. However, as noted above, and in line with the title and spirit of this paper, our intention is to open conversations as to how such work can be further developed and improved.

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ⁱ The research questions were: 'What does the concept of an internationalised MBA mean for the students? And to what extent is it serving their international expectations and needs?'